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Nominal notification a deterrent to AIDS test

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Compelling doctors to reveal the names of those who tested positive for HIV/AIDS would only aggravate the situation, said Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir today.

"The nominal notification is a major deterrent to people testing for HIV/AIDS as they fear that the information would be leaked.

"The notification includes names and people are worried about the stigma and discrimination involved," said Marina.

She said that when people do not get themselves tested, they would not receive pre and post counselling on the issues concerning the disease.

This counselling is ongoing if a person has tested positive for the virus. HIV/AIDS is categorised as a notifiable infectious disease under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988, along with other diseases such as cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis.

The Act stipulates that doctors have to submit the names, identity card number, address, diagnosis and date of diagnosis to the nearest health officer.

Doctors found to be violating this regulation would face legal action. A minimum fine of RM500 could be imposed on the violators.

Currently, HIV positive individuals are given two weeks to inform their spouses about their condition. If they do not inform their partners, the health officer would do so on their behalf.

"Two weeks is in itself not enough for patients to accept the situation and to pluck up the courage to tell other people. Of course they would not want other people to jump the gun," said Marina.

She called for the present system to be reviewed as the individual's name is not necessary for surveillance. Instead, demographical statistics such as sex, age and race are important factors in AIDS research.

"People are blamed for contracting HIV/AIDS. If people do not come forward to test due to the regulation, we cannot monitor the situation and the number of people with HIV/AIDS effectively," she added.

She suggested anonymous testing where only the demographical statistics would be submitted to the Ministry as a counter measure.

Meanwhile, the Ministry's principal assistant director of disease control (AIDS/STD) Dr Ahamad Jusoh has given his assurance that all information on people with HIV/AIDS will only be given to their spouses.

He said that the present system of nominal notification had come under praise internationally for its coverage and monitoring. The information collected was also used for statistical purposes.

Dr Ahamad said that people who breach information regarding this matter aside from informing the Ministry would be liable to a RM3,000 fine.

He said the division's representatives would be attending a seminar for Asean countries on the monitoring of AIDS in Tokyo from March 27 to 31.

The nominal versus the non-nominal notification issue would also be debated there.

The breach of doctor-patient confidentiality on this issue will also be discussed at the Second National Medico-Legal Conference at the Istana Hotel on April 1 by members of the medical and legal professions.

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